DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 692 HE 027 776

AUTHOR Ellis, Jon B.; Cantrell, Peggy J.
TITLE What Do Students in Psychology Courses Know about Clinical Psychology?
PUB DATE 93
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association (39th, Atlanta, GA, March 24-27, 1993).
AVAILABLE FROM Dept. of Psychology, Box 70, 649, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 37614-0649.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Career Choice; *Clinical Psychology; Higher Education; *Knowledge Level; Majors (Students); Psychologists; *Psychology; *Student Attitudes; *Undergraduate Students; Undergraduate Study
IDENTIFIERS Celebrities

ABSTRACT

This study examined what psychology students know about clinical psychology as most students with declared majors in psychology state that they have career plans to work in applied psychology. A five-item questionnaire was administered to 162 undergraduates in three introductory and upper level psychology courses. The questionnaire asked students to define psychology and clinical psychology, to describe the educational requirements for a clinical psychologist, to describe the difference between a clinical psychologist and a psychiatrist and to name two prominent individuals in the field. Results indicated that generally all students displayed a poor understanding of clinical psychology. Although upper level students were better able to define psychology, their understanding of clinical psychology was no better than that of introductory students. Though many of the upper level students, if not most of them, reported interest in clinical psychology, they demonstrated little understanding of what this field entails. Fifty students were unable to name two psychologists, and of the rest, most cited Freud (though he was first a physician), and only 23 percent cited two appropriate names. Results support the need to emphasize basic information about applied careers early in students' academic careers. Contains one table and seven references. (JB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 375 692

What do Students in Psychology Courses Know About Clinical Psychology?

Jon B. Ellis and Peggy J. Cantrell

East Tennessee State University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Jon B. Ellis

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

NE 027 776

Running head: STUDENT'S KNOWLEDGE OF PSYCHOLOGY

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Abstract

When asked about career plans, most psychology majors indicate that they intend to work in the area of applied psychology. In order to examine undergraduate psychology students' understanding of basic knowledge regarding psychology and clinical psychology, a five-item questionnaire was administered to 162 undergraduates in introductory and upper level psychology courses. Generally, all students displayed a poor understanding of clinical psychology. Although upper level students were better able to define psychology, their understanding of clinical psychology was no better than that of introductory students. These results suggest that greater attention needs to be given to providing undergraduates a more accurate review of the nature of applied psychology

What do Students in Psychology Courses Know About Clinical Psychology?

Most undergraduate psychology students align themselves with the applied areas of psychology and clinical psychology, in particular. When undergraduates in psychology courses are asked about career goals, a majority will indicate the intent to work in mental health or counseling settings (Ellis & Cantrell, 1991).

Although many undergraduates in psychology courses express these interests, they are unable to convey even rudimentary knowledge of the scientific or professional aspects of applied psychology. Henderson (1988) found that many seniors and master's level graduate students were unable to give names of historical figures, contemporary psychologists, or major concepts in psychology.

Warner and Bradley (1991) found that undergraduate psychology students have distorted perceptions regarding the activities of clinical psychologists, counselors, and psychiatrists. Other studies have shown that the public has a blurred idea about the differences among mental health professionals (McGuire & Borowy, 1979; Schindler, Berren, Hannah, Beigel, & Santiago, 1987; Webb, 1989; Wood, Jones, & Benjamin, 1986). Thus, there

appears to be a need to investigate what students in undergraduate psychology courses know about psychology and the applied areas of psychology.

In order to satisfy our curiosity and to gain insight into what undergraduates in psychology courses know about psychology and clinical psychology, beginning level undergraduates were compared to upper level students. It was hypothesized that upper level psychology students (i.e., juniors and seniors) would be better able than introductory psychology students to define psychology and more accurately articulate basic ideas of clinical psychology.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were 162 undergraduates in three psychology courses; 54 in Introduction to Psychology; 54 in a junior level course, Psychology of Personal Adjustment; and 54 in a senior level course, Introduction to the Study of Personality.

Procedure

On the first day of classes all students were administered a 5-item questionnaire that asked them to briefly answer five questions: (a) What is psychology? (b) What is clinical psychology? (c) What are the

educational requirements for a person to be licensed as a clinical psychologist? (d) What is the difference between a clinical psychologist and a psychiatrist? (e) Name two "famous" psychologists or people who have made an impact on psychology. All responses were anonymous and confidential.

Results

A breakdown of student responses to the five questions is presented in Table 1. Approximately 50% of all students defined psychology as "the study of human and/or animal behavior. Another 50 students (30.9%) defined psychology as "the study of the mind."

Insert Table 1 about here

In response to Question 2, nearly 70% described clinical psychology as some form of applied treatment ("counseling, talking to people about their problems, mental problems," etc.). However, 21 students (13%) did not answer the question.

In response to educational requirements for clinical psychologists, 51 students (31.5%) said that a PhD is required. Nearly 50% were incorrect, and 20% did not know.

On Question 4, 24 students (14.8%) said that a clinical psychologist earns a PhD and that a psychiatrist earns an MD. Another 63 students (38.9%) described the difference as therapy versus medication as a mode of treatment. Nearly 50% of all students either did not know or were confused.

Students were somewhat more successful at naming two "famous" psychologists. Freud was the most popular choice, being named by 105 students (65.3%). However, 50 students were unable to mention two appropriate names, and 16 could offer no appropriate name.

A chi-square procedure was used to examine whether students in upper level classes, in contrast to introductory students, demonstrated a better understanding of the knowledge required to answer the five questions.

One student in the introductory course gave reasonably accurate responses to all five questions. Twelve in the Adjustment course and nine in the Personality course did so, as well. The difference was significant, $\chi^2(1, N = 162) = 10.20$, $p < .01$, indicating a better understanding of the questions by upper level students than by introductory students.

The same procedure was used for examining responses to the four remaining questions. There was a significant difference on Question 3, indicating that upper level students demonstrated a better understanding of the educational requirements for a clinical psychologist, $\underline{X}^2(1, \underline{N} = 162) = 12.70$, $\underline{p} < .01$, than did introductory psychology students. The chi-square was not significant for Questions 2, 4, and 5, indicating no difference between introductory students' and upper level students' ability to define psychology or their understanding of clinical psychology.

Discussion

These five questions represent some basic information that should be seen as essential knowledge for undergraduate psychology students, especially those who may move on to an applied area. These results show that students in upper level psychology courses are better able to offer a basic definition of psychology. The same is not as true of their understanding of clinical psychology and psychiatry. Although many, if not most, of the students in psychology courses report an interest in clinical psychology, they demonstrate little understanding of what it is. This fact should be a signal to faculty in applied areas that many upper

level psychology students, have only a vague understanding of the field in which they say they want to work. Many of our respondents equate clinical psychology with medicine. Others see clinical psychologists as people with training in psychology, but professionals who are at some lower level of degree status than physicians. Although most of our subjects equate Freud with psychology, even this is misleading because he was first a physician. At the other extreme are those students who equate clinical psychology with Ann Landers, Joyce Brothers and Frazier Crane, the psychiatrist of "Cheers," the popular television program. This fact should encourage teachers of psychology to emphasize basic information about applied areas early in their students' academic careers.

References

Ellis, J., & Cantrell, P. (1991, March). What do psychology students know about psychology and clinical psychology? Paper presented at the meeting of the Southeastern Psychological Association, New Orleans, LA.

Henderson, B. B. (1988). What students know about the history of psychology before taking the course. Teaching of Psychology, 15, 204-205.

McGuire, J., & Borowy, T. (1979). Attitudes toward mental health professionals. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 10, 74-79.

Schindler, F., Berren, M., Hannah, M., Beigel, A., & Santiago, J. (1987). How the public perceives psychiatrists, psychologists, nonpsychiatric physicians, and members of the clergy. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 18, 371-376.

Warner, D., & Bradley, J. (1991). Undergraduate psychology students' views of counselors, psychiatrists, and psychologists: A challenge of academic psychologists. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 22, 138-140.

Webb, A. (1989). What's in a question? Three methods for investigating psychology's public image. Professional Psychology: Research and Practice. 20, 301-304.

Wood, W., Jones, M., Benjamin, L. T., Jr. (1986). Surveying psychology's public image. American Psychologist, 41, 947-953.

Table 1

Student Responses to the Five Questions

Response Category	Frequency	%
What is Psychology?		
Human/animal/behavior*	84	51.9
"The mind"	50	30.9
Other processes	10	06.2
Clinical psychology	8	04.9
Don't know	10	06.2
What is Clinical Psychology?		
Applied treatment*	111	68.5
Research	19	11.7
Medical	11	06.8
Don't know	21	13.0
What are the Educational Requirements for a Person to be a Clinical Psychologist?		
PhD*	51	31.5
PhD in clinical psychology*	1	00.6
Master's degree	38	23.5
Bachelor's degree	26	16.0
Some graduate training	11	06.8
MD or medical training	3	01.9
Don't know	32	19.8

Table 1 (con't)

What is the Difference Between a Psychiatrist and a Clinical Psychologist?		
MD vs. PhD*	24	14.8
Drug vs. therapy	63	38.9
Confused	75	46.2
Name Two "Famous" Psychologists or People Who Have Made an Impact on Psychology		
Freud	109	67.3
Other than Freud	37	22.8
Celebrity	3	01.9
Faculty or textbook author	22	06.8
Don't know	2	01.2
Additional Breakdown of Question 5		
Two appropriate names*	37	22.8
Two including Freud*	75	46.8
Freud only	30	18.5
One name only	4	02.5
None appropriate	16	09.9

*Correct responses

Author's Notes

Requests for reprints should be sent to Jon B. Ellis, Department of Psychology, Box 70,649, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, TN 37614-0649